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SUBJECT: CIS INFORMAL SUMMIT: MEDVEDEV AND KOSOVO

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

11. (C) Summary. The uncertainty of Kosovo and the lure of meeting heir apparent Dmitriy Medvedev brought all 12 CIS leaders to Moscow for the February 21-22 CIS Informal Summit. While the MFA pitched a new seriousness in its approach to the CIS, Putin used the summit to introduce Medvedev and level harsh criticism against the West's decision to recognize Kosovo's independence. Medvedev assured the CIS leaders that his foreign policy will follow the path laid by Putin. Among the many bilaterals -- Putin with Voronin, Saakashvili, Aliyev, Bakiyev and Rakhmon, -- the most notable was Putin-Saakashvili meeting, which continued a trend to improved Russia-Georgia relations with the promise of direct flights between the two capitals resuming by early April. End summary.

Twelve Smiling Men

12. (C) Russian officials were pleased with the full house at the February 21-22 CIS Informal Summit, which First DFM Denisov used to caution against hurriedly burying the CIS. In a February 21 interview, Denisov maintained that the strength of the organization lay in its flexible and less structured form, which provided a forum to discuss and solve problems encountered by the former Soviet republics. For this reason, he added, all twelve states have continued to participate in the organization, even those which have frequently indicated they would depart, such as Georgia and Ukraine. MFA Third CIS Department Director Maksim Peshkov told us February 26 that the GOR was pleased with the results of the summit. The presence of all twelve leaders had occurred only rarely in recent years. (Press reports highlighted Yushchenko's two Moscow visits in as many weeks; Kocharian's attendance despite an unsettled domestic situation in the wake of presidential elections; and Bakiyev's effort to attend despite an immediate follow-on travel to Seoul for Lee Myung Bak's inauguration.) MFA Second CIS Director Viktor Sorokin echoed Peshkov, telling us February 27 that the CIS had finally come into its own as an "as-needed" organization with no political agenda, but a focus on problems shared by participating countries. The membership was voluntary with no political pressure to stay in or out, he added. The two-day photo op produced little substance but many smiling faces, creating the illusion that the CIS, after years of public disharmony, was back.

Kosovo: Double-edged Sword

13. (U) Commentators attributed the full house to tension over the possible consequences (Russia's reactions) to Kosovo's independence, as well as the formal unveiling of First DPM Medvedev. With none of the CIS members having recognized Kosovo, Putin was able to use the gathering to lash out against the West's decision on Kosovo, warning of a

"whole chain of unpredictable consequences." He termed Kosovo's independence a double-edged sword whose second edge will strike the faces of Kosovo's supporters. Plus, the Next Putin

Plus, the Next Putin

14. (U) While introducing his anointed successor, Putin declared that the CIS was Russia's clear and unchangeable priority, justified not only by the common past of its members, but by a future that will continue to bind them together. He advised the other CIS leaders to devise country development strategies to 2020 as he had done for Russia. A seemingly relaxed Medvedev parroted Putin's line, reiterating, "In our countries and among our peoples, there is no alternative to longer-term cooperation." Putin had promised that under Medvedev there would be no "revolutionary" change in Russia's foreign policy, and gave Medvedev credit for having authored many of the CIS policies currently being implemented. Medvedev proposed that a CIS emergency fund as well as a plan for a union-wide transportation network be on the agenda at this year's Bishkek summit.

Bilaterals

15. (C) With Central Asian and Caucasus countries evidently in mind, Putin emphasized Russia's resolve to tackle xenophobia. The issue was touched on in bilaterals with Bakiyev, Aliyev and Rakhmon. With seven Kyrgyz citizens murdered in Russia in the previous five weeks, GOR officials noted that Bakiyev was particularly interested in receiving GOR assurances on a crackdown against xenophobia. According to Sorokin, the Putin-Voronin meeting affirmed the GOR's determination to keep channels of communication open regardless of the "destructive influence" of Kosovo. The Putin-Saakashvili bilateral also revolved around the implications of Kosovo, with Saakashvili mainly concerned about possible GOR action on frozen conflicts in the Caucasus. Putin stressed that all would depend on the GOG. The two presidents agreed to resume direct flights and postal service between Russia and Georgia, ease visa restrictions, and reconsider trade sanctions (more details septel). Putin and Yushchenko, who had met February 12-13 during the Intergovernmental Commission session (septel), did not have a separate bilateral during the Summit.

Comment

16. (C) Despite the rhetoric, we expect no dramatic change in the GOR's approach to the CIS. Vast economic disparities and different geopolitical orientations mean that the CIS structure provides little unifying force. Instead, it will serve the GOR's need to periodically exert its influence in the former Soviet space while Russia's increasing economic power will likely make the union more attractive to its other members.
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